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SUBJECT: WOMEN IN 2009 MUNI ELECTIONS? MIXED PREDICTIONS

FROM POLS, MEPI TRAINEES

Classified By: Acting Consul General CB Toney for  
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) BEGIN SUMMARY: A delegation from the Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative met May 13 with local politicians and prominent members of civil society to discuss trends in political reform. Members of Jeddah's Municipal Council described the body's growing role as a provider of government oversight and a check on the mayor's power. Female journalists and business leaders described ways to increase the political participation of women, giving mixed predictions as to whether women will be allowed to run in the 2009 municipal elections. END SUMMARY.

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GROWTH, LIMITS OF MUNICIPAL COUNCIL AUTHORITY  
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12. (C) NEA/PI Director Ken Gross and NEA/PI Political Officer Dr. Charles Kiamie traveled to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia May 13 to meet with area reformists. The MEPI delegation was eager to gather local thoughts on the prospects of women's participation in the 2009 local elections. (Note: When municipal elections were first held in 2005, women were denied access to polls and prevented from declaring candidacy due to what were described as technical reasons. At the same time, however, senior SAG officials speculated that women would be allowed to participate in 2009. End note.)

13. (C) The delegation met the president, vice-president, and two members of the Jeddah Municipal Council, who described the increasing role of the body, which is composed of seven elected members and seven appointed members. Council President Tarek Fadaak, an appointed member, said that the Council has been establishing its authority as a check on the power of mayor Adel Fageeh through such means as budget audits and ethics reviews. He also noted that some citizens are now approaching the Council to resolve legal disputes. Mohammed Abudawood, another appointed member, described the Council's increasing decision-making role, saying it was responsible for initiating a SR1.5 million project to curb dengue fever.

14. (C) Elected member Hasan Zahrani said that despite such accomplishments, the public tends to be critical of the Municipal Council. He suggested that one reason is that people do not understand the limits of the Council's authority. He added that the Council members themselves are often unclear on technical issues pertaining to powers such as controlling zoning and issuing building permits. He said that another obstacle was that although the SAG established municipal councils to increase public participation, it does not give the body enough support to properly function. He cited as example the SR 50K salary for council members, saying that this is too low to permit a member to devote his

full time to council affairs. Fadaak added that it is easier and safer for people to criticize a quasi-governmental body such as the Municipal Council than official government entities such as the mayor, the governor, or the ministries.

15. (C) Fadaak said that the seven members elected in 2005 won due to their spirit of volunteerism. Elected member Hussein Al-Bar, a physician, architect, and cousin to the previous mayor, said that this sentiment is evident in the increasing number of retirees who dedicate time to Council efforts, including four committees of 70 volunteers each who are collectively known as Friends of the Municipality.

16. (C) Asked if women would be allowed to run in 2009 municipal elections, Al-Bar said he thought this unlikely, explaining that although there is support from elites, there is also a large religious base that opposes the idea. Fadaak agreed and characterized this conflict as one between liberal political power and conservative public power, predicting that the latter will prevail over the near term. On the margins of the meeting, he expressed pessimism that women would be granted the right to participate next year.

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MIXED PREDICTIONS FOR WOMEN CANDIDATES IN 2009  
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17. (C) The delegation's remaining meetings focused on civil society actors and the role of activists in promoting indigenous reform. Three participants in the National Democratic Institute (NDI) Candidacy Training Program in Dubai discussed the prospects of women running in Jeddah's 2009 municipal elections and ways to increase women's

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participation in Saudi government. Samar Fatany (strictly protect), a radio journalist, said she expected women to be allowed to run in 2009, and believed that NDI participants will be among the candidates. Maha Akeel (strictly protect), Managing Editor of the Journal of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and a former reporter for Arab News, was less certain that women will be allowed to participate, noting that similar hopes leading up to the 2005 municipal elections were ultimately in vain. Manal Al-Sharif (strictly protect), an editor for the newspaper Al-Madina, was similarly skeptical of the chances of a woman attaining one of the council's seven elected seats, although she was slightly more optimistic that a woman might be chosen by the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs (MOMRA) for one of the seven appointed seats.

18. (C) On ways to promote women's participation in Saudi politics, Ms. Fatany cited the importance of campaign and media skills. She also said it was vital that women become more aware of the various levels of Saudi government so that they can capitalize on opportunities to secure appointments at the municipal, provincial, regional, and principality levels. Ms. Al-Sharif, a co-founder of the Saudi Women's Action Network (SWAN), said that the ability to self-organize was the single most vital skill for increasing the political clout of women. Regarding outside financial support for women's campaigns, Ms. Fatany said that most women would be hesitant to receive it, even if it was permitted by the government, out of fear that it would paint them as outsiders' pawns.

19. (C) The three women agreed that the biggest impediment to increasing the political role of women was the power maintained by conservative Islamists. They were uncertain about the extent of this influence, but suspected that it exerted itself both through public thought currents and private pressure placed on government officials. All three believed that Mecca Governor Prince Khalid would like to bring about more political liberalization in the Hijaz, but suspected that he is being restrained by conservative forces. Ms. Akeel said that the Organization of the Islamic

Conference (OIC) needs to exert a moderating influence on Islamic extremists. Ms. Fatany said that the SAG should develop programs to show all Saudis how to achieve a better life through developing more marketable skills. The three women concluded the discussion by agreeing that they were all eager to work within the system for progress.

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GREATER ROLE FOR WOMEN IN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE  
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¶10. (C) MEPI delegates met with members of the Khadijah Bint Khoweiled Center, the women's section of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI). Executive Director of Public Relations Sarah Baghdadi (strictly protect) explained how the center is designed to serve women entrepreneurs, working women, and society in general. She said that members participate in mixed-gender JCCI sessions, and that two of JCCI's elected board members and three of its executives are women, as are 35 of its roughly 200 employees. The JCCI has increasingly been assuming the role of a gender-integrated lobbying organization.

¶11. (C) In 2007, the JCCI hosted the Saudi Women's Forum with the goal of highlighting the contributions of women and presenting a positive entrepreneurial model for Arab and Muslim women. This conference generated several recommendations, such as the need for more women involvement at all levels of government, including the Shoura Council and the Council of Ministers. An additional recommendation was that the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority should take on the role of training youth for employment. These recommendations were submitted to the King, generating several promising decrees. Ms. Baghdadi noted that the primary obstacle to more rights for women is the interpretation and implementation of the Kingdom's laws, and that often regional ministry offices make arbitrary decisions about enforcement.

¶12. (C) Asked if either of the elected women leaders within JCCI would consider running in the 2009 elections if women are allowed, Ms. Baghdadi said that they would probably prefer to focus on JCCI for now. Noura Alturki (strictly protect), a researcher working at JCCI, said that women are not yet organized enough to mount a serious candidate, and that extensive campaigning expertise will be needed.

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A ROLE FOR GRASS ROOTS ORGANIZATIONS  
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¶13. (C) MEPI delegates also met with Fatin Bundagji, a writer and reformer who has participated in MEPI training programs and has, by her own testimony, benefited from her experiences in the U.S. She emphasized the need to focus on capacity-building and volunteerism, and said that grass-roots organizations were key to community development and, ultimately, greater political participation by all Saudis. Bundagji pointed to a new women's basketball league as an example of a self-organizing community that creates ripple effects in society.

¶14. (C) Ms. Bundagji's primary complaint about the Jeddah Municipal Council was that there was no accountability to the city's residents. She also said that council members do not know their role vis--vis the mayor and the governorate. Ms. Bundagji said she does not believe women will be allowed to run in the 2009 municipal elections, but that they may be allowed to vote. She said she would accept an appointment to one of the non-elected council seats if nominated, although she believes that if MOMRA were to start appointing women to these seats, appointees would likely be culturally conservative women who would not promote greater female participation in Saudi politics. Her protg, Rasha Hefzi

(strictly protect), spoke bluntly about the need to court Saudi youth, particularly in greater Jeddah, where she and her reformist colleagues perhaps represent 60% of Jeddawi society. Competing government statistics and a lack of independent social research centers make determining Hefzi's supposition yet another challenge for activists young and old.

¶15. (C) NEA/PI Comment: MEPI's Jeddah meetings were an opportunity to gain first-hand information regarding reform in the Kingdom generally and the prospects for women's participation in the 2009 local elections specifically. While both government and civil society types alike expressed dissatisfaction with the pace of political reform and the likelihood that "technical reasons" would again be used to deny women voting and candidacy rights. Nonetheless, these advocates remain undeterred and will continue to push for greater openness, transparency, and expression in Jeddah and beyond. The USG should make a more concerted attempt to cultivate new reformist contacts in Saudi Arabia, despite the restrictive nature of posts like Jeddah, to avoid a "recycling" of elites while encouraging a younger generation hungry for change. Exchange programs for local council members and training exercises for young reformers will give these and other promoters of change ammunition in their fight for more representative institutions and freer political space. End comment.  
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